

IRELAND — BATTLEFRONT FOR DEMOCRACY

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Price 10p

**NEW BOOKS PUBLICATIONS
14 PARLIAMENT STREET. DUBLIN 2**

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'I have become more and more convinced—and the only question is to bring this conviction home to the English working class—that it can never do anything decisive here in England until it separates its policy with regard to Ireland in the most definite way from the policy of the ruling classes, until it not only makes common cause with the Irish, but actually takes the initiative in dissolving the Union established in 1801 and replacing it by a free federal relationship. And indeed, this must be done, not as a matter of sympathy with Ireland, but as a demand made in the interests of the English proletariat. If not, the English people will remain tied to the leading strings of the ruling classes, because it must join with them in a common front against Ireland.'

MARX, letter to Kugelman, November 29, 1869.

The present crisis in the relations of Britain and Ireland has reached new forms and new intensity since Marx wrote those words. Harold Wilson in his television broadcast of May 25 declared that Northern Ireland faced 'the gravest crisis in her history'. This is a bold assertion, in face of the bloodstained record of the eight centuries of British intervention in Ireland ever since Henry II conducted his invasion to proclaim himself Lord of Ireland in 1172. The Irish national struggle has won significant successes during the years since Marx wrote. But the deep wound of the British-imposed partition through the establishment of the ultra-reactionary settler régime in Northern Ireland to dispossess the people of their land in the old tenacious stronghold of popular struggle, and maintained by British military power and financial backing, has flared to new intensity, as in the old Carsonite days of over half a century ago, once again to menace the whole future of democracy alike in Ireland and in Britain.

Marx on the British Working Class and Ireland

The warning sounded by Marx over a century ago, and cited at the head of these Notes, against the fatal consequences for the British working class of entering into alliance with the British ruling class in 'a common front against Ireland', that is, of accepting a bipartisan policy on the relations of Britain with Ireland, in place of the joint struggle of the British and Irish peoples against British

imperialist policy, remains more valid than ever in the crisis of today despite all the changes which have taken place during the century since Marx wrote those words. It is manifest that a new critical stage has arisen in the relations of Britain and Ireland, following the breakdown of the Sunningdale Agreement signed on January 1 this year for so-called 'power-sharing', and the subsequent bankruptcy of British official policy in face of the open offensive of the ultra-reactionary right-wing Orange domination in Northern Ireland, maintained in power by the military and financial support of Britain, to find any alternative save to retreat and come to terms with it in practice, even while professing to repudiate it in principle.

Danger Trap for the British People over Ireland

In this complex transitional situation there is danger that some sections of popular opinion in Britain, justly opposed to the official policy of seeking to impose a solution by military strength, and conscious of the bankruptcy of British imperialist policy in the present impasse, should fall into the trap of advocating as an alternative programme that the menace of the crisis and offensive of reaction in Northern Ireland, created by British imperialist policy, should be left for the Irish people to settle, in place of recognising the joint responsibility of the British and Irish working people to work together for a solution in the interests of both peoples. Such a policy of spurious 'non-intervention' in the crisis in Ireland, equivalent to a denial of the responsibility of the British people to fight the British imperialist policy in Ireland, would be as harmful to the true interests of the British working class as the parallel bipartisan policy of alliance with Toryism for the maintenance of British military power and domination in Ireland.

Marx and Engels on Ireland and Britain

Both Marx and Engels conducted a profound study, not only of the background of the then seven centuries of invasion and intervention by England's rulers in Ireland, as well as the preceding two centuries of Danish incursions, but of the longer-term background of the development of the ancient social structure or clan formation of the gentes surviving tenaciously into changed times and conditions. This special attention given by both Marx and Engels to the whole historic record of Ireland and the relations of England's rulers and Ireland, reflected their recognition that Ireland was Britain's first colony; and that the successive invasions and interventions, the spoliation and expropriation of the land, the installation of settlers with a hostile religious creed to occupy a privileged

position as pugnacious upholders of the ruling power of the English monarch or Westminster parliament, with all the various devices of statecraft, agrarian legislation and successive political forms, constituted the most revealing long-term record of the whole development of colonialism. 'England never has and never can,' Marx wrote to Engels in 1869, '—so long as the present relation lasts—rule Ireland otherwise than by the most abominable reign of terror and the most reprehensible corruption.' From their study of this historical development Marx and Engels reached the conclusion that participation in English domination over Ireland constituted the Achilles' heel for the advance of democracy in England. 'The English Republic under Cromwell,' wrote Marx to Engels, 'met shipwreck in Ireland.' At the same time they took account of the vulnerability of the oppressed Irish peasantry through their attachment to the Catholic fatal blindness in relation to the necessity of their class alignment. 'Ireland still remains the Holy Isle,' wrote Engels to Marx in December 1869, 'whose aspirations must on no account be mixed with the profane class struggles of the rest of the sinful world.'

Marx's 'Deeper' View of the British Working Class and Ireland

Marx originally anticipated that the victory of the working class in England would bring the liberation of Ireland. Such was a rational anticipation at a time when there was not yet any example of a victory of national liberation against imperialism prior to the socialist revolution. But with further study Marx revised this view of the order of historical development in the period ahead. With the objective realism of his scientific method he did not seek to cover up this significant revision of his former view of the prospect of the future development in respect of Ireland and Britain. On the contrary, he proclaimed and emphasised with the sharpest candour this revision of his view of the course of prospective development of the relations of Britain and Ireland and its significance for the British working class. He wrote (letter to Engels, December 10, 1869):

For a long time I believed that it would be possible to overthrow the Irish régime by English working class ascendancy. I always expressed this point of view in the *New York Tribune*. Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will *never accomplish anything* before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland. That is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general.

This 'deeper' view of Marx of the prospective future of the relations of Ireland and Britain in the coming period, and the consequences

of this for the role and future of the British working class, opened up for the first time an anticipation of the future development of the modern era, subsequently brought to full conscious clarity and definition by Lenin in his analysis of the relation of imperialism, the socialist revolution and national liberation.

Socialism and National Liberation

The significance of this anticipation of Marx over a century ago on the prospect of the relations of Ireland and Britain, and on the decisive bearing of this on the future of the British working class, opened for the first time a 'deeper' conception of the coming era of world development, not only in respect of the relations of Ireland and Britain, but on a wider scale, as the subsequent events of our era have demonstrated ('that is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general'). The first victory of the working class revolution in the most vulnerable centre of the imperialist powers was followed, not immediately by corresponding victories of working class revolution in the other Western imperialist states, but by the advancing battles and victories of national liberation, allied in action with the support of the socialist revolution, and by their joint effect undermining the basis of imperialism. This progressive undermining of the structure and basis of imperialism by the alliance of socialism and national liberation has prepared the way for the advance to the future victory of the working class in the Western highly developed countries. The understanding of this course of the historical process of the modern era was brought to conscious clarity by Lenin. It received its first anticipation in Marx's openly proclaimed revision of his initial view to advance to his 'deeper' analysis of the significance of the Irish question (which was then the key expression of the colonial question) and its decisive prior importance to open the way to the future advance and victory of the British working class.

Ireland Today—Explosive Storm Centre

The present high point of crisis of the Irish situation and of British imperialist policy in Ireland has become today a manifest explosive storm centre of the international situation, arousing the anxious concern and attention of the peoples all over the world. This is not only because of the historic significance of the Irish freedom struggle. It is also because British imperialism, whose political spokesmen have so long sought to lay down the law for other nations, is now wrestling with the simultaneous problems of record economic

deterioration at home and a rising level of military involvement and action within close reach of its own shores in Ireland, alongside violent incidents on British soil reflecting this conflict of imperialist policy in Ireland. Once again the Irish question has become a dominant issue of the political situation in Britain.

A Multiplicity of Voices

It is not surprising that in this situation a multiple medley of voices is sounded on all sides, offering an infinite variety of policies for a solution. The propositions advanced have included elaborate blueprints for a new partition. Demands have been sounded by significant sections for immediate British withdrawal and repudiation of further British responsibility for the course of events in Ireland. Schemes have been presented for devolution or a new federal structure. From other quarters emphatic demands have been clamorous for stronger action to maintain the power of Westminster. Successive increases have taken place in the despatch of British armed forces and arms to reinforce the military occupation of Northern Ireland. Such is the explosive powder-barrel which imperialist policy has created in Ireland. It will require all the concentration of the combined efforts of the Irish and British working people to advance along the dangerous and difficult path to a political solution of this situation.

Three Main Lines

In this medley of alternative policies propounded from a variety of quarters there are in fact three main lines represented by the majority of the participants. First, there is the British official bipartisan policy, conducted by successive governments, and directed towards the professed aim of 'power-sharing', that is, for the establishment of a local satellite 'Executive' in Northern Ireland combining representatives of the different parties and communities, within the limits of overriding sovereign British imperialist power and military occupation, alongside preparations for a form of voluntary co-operation of official representatives of the two parts of Ireland. The second is the die-hard ultra-right Unionist line, directly represented by the sectarian, dictatorial régime of the heirs of the Stormont tradition in Ulster, maintained in practice by British military power and finance, and closely linked, as in the Carsonite days, with the ultra-right Tory forces in Britain. The third line, most often ignored or little reported in the general press picture presented to the mass public in Britain, but of vital political importance, is that of the organised

working class forces in both parts of Ireland, represented by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, extended equally in the South and under its Northern Committee in the North, with the associated sections of British unions in the North.

Bankruptcy of British Official Bipartisan Policy

The Sunningdale Agreement, which was signed on January 1 this year as the expression of British official policy in Ireland, is already in ruins. The Sunningdale Agreement was the expression of the professed aim of 'power-sharing' within the limits of overriding British power and military occupation in Northern Ireland. The signatories of the Sunningdale Agreement were the British Tory government of Heath, with the support of the Parliamentary Labour Party and Liberal Party; Prime Minister Cosgrave for the Irish Republic; and a body called the 'Executive Designate' for Northern Ireland, consisting of representatives of three sections, the official Unionist Party led by Faulkner, the Social Democratic Labour Party represented by Gerry Fitt, and the Alliance Party, a new formation of a section of the Ulster Unionists desiring a more conciliatory policy. The provisions of the Sunningdale Agreement laid down that Northern Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom, and that no change could be made in its status except with the agreement of the majority of its citizens. The further provisions established a voluntary 'Council of Ireland' and a 'Consultative Assembly' to consist of representatives in equal numbers from the two parts of partitioned Ireland, for purposes of joint consultation and 'harmonisation' of policy, on the basis of the requirement of unanimous decisions by the representatives, composed in equal numbers from each of the two disparate parts of partitioned Ireland. From the point of view of British big business interests such economic co-operation of the two parts of partitioned Ireland was desirable in relation to the aim of aligning both parties together in the Common Market.

Sunningdale in Ruins

All this Sunningdale 'solution' is now in ruins. Faulkner succeeded in securing an initial endorsement of Sunningdale by the Northern Ireland Unionist Council by a majority of 454 to 379 in January. But thereafter he lost his majority leadership in the Northern Ireland Unionist Party and subsequently formed a new party. In the general election of February 1974, eleven of the twelve representatives returned to Westminster were associated in a bloc of opponents of

Sunningdale under the title 'United Ulster Unionist Council', including the official Northern Ireland Unionist Party under the leadership of Harry West, the 'Protestant Unionists' led by Craig and the 'Democratic Unionists' represented by Paisley. The twelfth seat was won by Gerry Fitt of the Social Democratic Labour Party, who had been a participant in the Sunningdale Agreement. The Faulkner Unionists and the Alliance Party won no seats. The break-up of the old alignment came to a head in May, when the most ruthless ultra-reactionary Orange offensive was launched in Northern Ireland in the name of a so-called 'Ulster Workers' Council', which made no pretence of being elected by anyone and had no relation to organisations of the working class movement. In the name of this spurious 'Ulster Workers' Council', a relentless offensive was launched to throttle the economy, close down power stations and factories, lock out masses of workers and conduct every type of intimidation. The Labour government initially proclaimed determination to stand up to such an offensive (and Len Murray on behalf of the TUC showed courage in facing the hysteria of sectarian elements mobilised by reaction in Belfast), and refused to negotiate with the spurious 'Ulster Workers' Council'. Initial military action was carried out to open the power stations. Subsequently the Labour government retreated from this line of action, while still proclaiming refusal to negotiate with the spurious 'Ulster Workers' Council'. This crisis test brought down the Sunningdale combination in ruins, Gerry Fitt for the SDLP resigned from the 'Executive Designate' because of the refusal to continue action against the 'Ulster Workers' Council'. Faulkner resigned from the 'Executive Designate' because of the refusal to negotiate with the 'Ulster Workers' Council'. Thus Sunningdale was in ruins. The reality remained the military occupation and action of British imperialism in Northern Ireland, desperately attempting without success so far to find some new formula to cover the naked reality of military dictatorship.

Offensive of Ultra-Right Toryism in Northern Ireland

With the increasingly manifest failure of the Sunningdale Agreement the old Stormont forces of Orange entrenched reaction in Northern Ireland judged the moment ripe to launch their offensive in May. The character of this offensive had to be adapted to the conditions of overriding British military power and occupation. The offensive did not bear the trappings of the old types of fascist coups, though there was in fact no lack of banned para-military organisations lurking and assaults and disappearance of victims in

the night. The essentially anti-democratic ultra-right Tory offensive was conducted in the name of a so-called 'Ulster Workers' Council', which had no connection with the organised working class movement, was elected by nobody and responsible to nobody. The throttling of the economy by the closing of power stations and key points of supply, where the representatives of Orange reaction had long been established in the privileged controlling positions, while any hint of opposition was silenced by the most ruthless technique of intimidation, was presented as a 'strike'. The extent of the intimidation can be judged from the fact that in the general election of February 296,000 voters in Northern Ireland had supported the Sunningdale Agreement for 'power-sharing', while an independent newspaper poll of Northern Ireland citizens at the beginning of June, conducted in weighted proportions, revealed 46 per cent in favour of 'power-sharing', including 33 per cent of the Northern Ireland Protestants (*Times*, June 5, 1974). The fact that these 296,000 Northern Ireland citizens opposed to the Orange offensive became invisible during the offensive, is sufficient evidence, not that these electors were lacking in civic courage, but that the most ruthless methods of intimidation were in operation to silence any resister or potential resister, not merely by pressure and threats for the men themselves, but for their jobs, their wives and children and their homes. The ferocious hostility of the reception given to Len Murray on his visit as Secretary of the British TUC to Belfast was sufficient evidence of the atmosphere of Orange terrorism.

Links with Ultra-Right Toryism in Britain

The Labour government, which refused to recognise the spurious 'Ulster Workers' Council' initially took steps to end the imposed throttling of the economy. On the initiative of the Labour government military action was taken to open the power stations. As soon as there was this sign of action from the British side, the leaders of Orange reaction and their 'Ulster Workers' Council' began to change their tune. They knew that they were in fact dependent on British military and financial support; according to the statement of a British government spokesman on May 30 the British treasury was paying out a gross total of £468 million a year in Northern Ireland, equivalent to £6-£7 a head for each of the 1.5 million inhabitants of Northern Ireland. Previously the spokesmen of Orange reaction had declared that they would continue their lock-out ('strike') until the demand for immediate elections was conceded. Now they declared that they were prepared to wait. Had the Labour government

continued its action to end the threat to the economy the result would have been defeat for the offensive of Orange reaction. But at this point the Labour government changed its line, cancelled orders for further action and announced the necessity to recognise the strength of feeling in Northern Ireland. What led to this change of line? Future documentary evidence may throw light. But current British press comments have indicated that higher military authorities had informed the Labour government that further military action to end the throttling of the economy would not be practicable. The Labour government had complied with this advice of the higher military authorities, while still refusing to recognise the 'Ulster Workers' Council'. If this account is correct, it would indicate the close links, as in the old Carsonite days, between Orange reaction in Northern Ireland and higher military circles and ultra-right Toryism in Britain. Once again the events in Ireland reveal a menace to democracy equally in Ireland and in Britain, and require the joint action of the Irish and British working people to defeat this menace.

Violence and Politics

British military action in Northern Ireland is presented by official spokesmen as an impartial intervention to keep the peace between warring forces which would otherwise plunge Northern Ireland in civil war. Action, it is claimed, is taken equally on both sides to hinder the violence, ban paramilitary organisations and punish or intern representatives of violence. But in fact the main proportion of the British military forces in Northern Ireland is stationed in the Republican working class areas and the main arrests, internments and incidents have taken place in the Republican working class areas. It is true that the violence of the ultra-reactionary Tory régime in Northern Ireland has led to a section of Republican supporters (the 'Provisionals') breaking away from the basic programme of mass political struggle for political change, to conduct sporadic acts of violence, not the organised mass struggle for the change of a political régime, but senseless small-scale acts of bomb explosions against innocent citizens, men, women and children. On this the reader may usefully refer to the article of Andrew Rothstein in this journal in September 1973 on 'Terrorism—Some Plain Words':

The kind of terrorism which wantonly kills innocent people—whether by bombs thrown in crowded shops and offices, by the massacre of sportsmen at the Olympic Games, or in the course of hijacking aircraft—does absolutely nothing to win the sympathy of the working people in other countries, particularly the organised workers who have the greatest power to exercise

pressure in the imperialist countries. . . . Even more does this logic apply in the case of Northern Ireland. For there the Irish patriots are not fighting in a far-off country, remote from the experience of British workers. On the contrary, during the 1913 Dublin strike in a small way, in 1919 and 1920 during the Irish War of Independence on a much larger scale, experience has shown that the active support of British organised labour in pressure on its own government could be won, at times when the British workers were far less politically angry, aware and active than they are today. . . .

Throwing bombs without discrimination into crowded shops or other places where ordinary workers gather, or shooting persons selected only because they will serve as a symbol of reprisal without their actually being connected with the forces of the national enemy (or its agents), helps the enemies of civil rights in Northern Ireland and the enemies of Irish unity and freedom, by pushing away the advocates of working class unity against those enemies, both in Ireland and in Britain.

This waste of precious energy, this self-stultification, cannot but arouse serious concern.

This warning is more than ever important in the present crisis today, when there is greater need than ever for the closest co-operation of the Irish and British working people in the common struggle.

Joint Action of the Irish and British Working Class for a Political Solution

The crisis in Ireland can only be solved by the joint action of the Irish and British working class to end the imperialist military domination, emergency powers and denial of democratic rights in Northern Ireland, establish democratic civil rights in Northern Ireland, and thereby open the way for the joint action of the Irish and British working class to end the conditions giving rise to British military intervention and occupation in Northern Ireland, and make possible the future free development of the Irish people along lines and forms chosen by the Irish people without the intervention of any foreign controlling power. The resolution of the Annual Conference of the Connolly Association on June 1 expressed the conception of the future path in these terms:

This conference of the Connolly Association, held in Birmingham on June 1 and 2, 1974, calls upon the Labour government to make a complete break with the policies of the previous Conservative government in relation to Ireland, and to abandon the principle and practise of bipartisanship on this question. In particular it asks that the government should make a declaration of intent to withdraw from Ireland, totally and unconditionally, to cease to lay claim to any part of the territory of that country, and thus make attainable the desire of the majority of the Irish people for a united republic. It should at the same time recognise the right of the majority of the Irish people to determine the scope and timing of such withdrawal in the light of their

knowledge of political conditions within the country, and should offer to submit to their decision in this matter. There should be no question of using the threat of sudden unilateral withdrawal of the armed forces as a means of facing the Irish people with the danger of civil war and thus compelling a further toleration of Westminster control.

In the interval between the declaration of intent and the withdrawal, the British government should express its willingness to extend civil rights and liberties in accordance with the wishes of the civil rights organisations and the trade unions, and to foster by every means the reconciliation of the divided communities.

The British government should compensate those affected economically as a result of past mistaken policies.

Similarly the statement of the Political Committee of the British Communist Party on June 1 published its view on the immediate path forward in the relations of Britain and Ireland:

Recent grave events may prove to be a last warning on the need for a democratic, non-imperialist, non-sectarian, solution. Direct rule imposed and maintained by force can only make matters worse. . . .

As an indication of its intention to find a new way out of the crisis parliament should immediately pass a Bill of Rights for the people of Northern Ireland, emergency powers should be ended, all internees released. . . .

Wide-ranging discussions on the immediate political future should be held with representative political parties, the trade unions, the civil rights movement and all representative bodies of the people in Northern Ireland on the democratic, economic and social changes needed in Northern Ireland and on the Irish problem as a whole. . . .

Steps on these lines can create conditions for the early withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland and the end of British imperialist control. In the meantime the harassment of working class areas, whether Catholic or Protestant, should be ended.

These statements indicate the proposals advocated by the supporters of democratic co-operation of the Irish and British working people for the path forward in the present acute crisis towards a political solution.

R. Palme Dutt is the editor of

Labour Monthly

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Dept IBD, Unity Publications (Finchley) Ltd
134 Ballards Lane, London, N3 2PD